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Women in Lit pd. 6

12/5/11

Women in the Fire Department

Back in history it was simple: men work and get food while women stay home, cook and take care of the family. Men were the brute strength and women were just expected to take care of everything else (Salemi 2010). What was once seen as just “the way it is,” those stereotypes have created a mold for modern day society to categorize what is considered masculine or feminine. In work force there is the “men’s job” and the “women’s job.” When people think of the fire department, the last thing they think of is a female firefighter. Because she does not fit in the mold for what it takes to work a “mans job” most people find it hard believe that a woman is capable of becoming a fire fighter.

Society stereotypes nearly every profession with gender, body type, and physical abilities. Of the thousands of firefighters across the United States, only a small two percent make up the amount of women in the department (NFPA.org). While there are certain physical requirements one must meet to join the department, there are no restrictions on gender. However, being a male dominant job, people have seemed to place their own restrictions on the gender type for fire fighters hence the name “firemen” not “firewomen.”

My interviewee, Kehau Lau of the Kakaako fire station, described to me that entering the department was like entering a man’s world. They had their brotherhood and for a woman to come in was almost unheard of. She stated that men have their guy code and for a woman to come into the equation it changes everything; the way they talk and behave as well as their overall mannerism. The male fire fighters almost don’t know how to act. While they would want to be chivalrous to the females, they also had to remember that she must carry her own weight and be capable of doing everything they can. It is hard for them to step back and accept that some women are just as able as they are. Some male fire fighters feel that they are losing a sense of their manhood when women can do the same things they can. For example, she shared with me how the men at her station are always quick to grab the heavy equipment even though she is perfectly able to carry it on her own. While this may just be out of chivalry, it shows how gender stereotypes are prevalent today. Not all women are the stereotype skinny blond girls who don’t lift a finger. Many are hardworking and push to do something out of the ordinary.

Fire fighting it requires physical strength, quickness, and a daredevil attitude. Upon applying for this job one must complete a fitness and academic test. If both are passed, several weeks of intense training are required along with daily workouts. Along with the mental toughness and sharpness, firefighters require hours of studying to pass tests to receive their certification in different aspects of the department (BLS). Because of the amount of work it takes to make it in this job, it turns heads when people see a women fire fighter. For this reason, there is an attitude from society as well as many male firefighters that women can’t handle a job like theirs.

Jobs that require heavy lifting and dangerous situations are not seen as a women’s job but rather a “man’s job” simply because they feel women are not strong enough. Kehau gave me her perspective on this saying that “It is hard because people expect you to fail. I just have to know that I may not be the strongest or the fastest but I can pull my weight and get the job done.” As a minority, the female fire fighter must work twice as hard just to keep up with their male coworkers. Because they face so many life-threatening and graphic situations and on a daily basis, society does not see a woman having the mental toughness it takes as well. It is a common stereotype that women are overly emotional and dramatic. In a job like this it is not seen as okay to be emotional about those situations because it shows weakness. The minute a female decides to pull the “female card,” saying that it is because she is a girl it’s okay to be weaker is when most male fire fighters lose respect and a sense of equality for them.

Many women are looked at differently because people believe that they are not strong enough to save people and they would be doing a “man’s job.” However, this is hardly the case. Local woman firefighter, Kehau Lau of the Kakaako station, stated "even though I work out just as hard, if not harder, as any of the guys at the station, they still look at me like I am not able to tasks as well as them." The men often look at the female fire fighter and wonder when she is going to break. If you cry once, you are just a girl, and to them that is not okay for the job. To put it into simple terms, you can never have a bad day.

Along with the physical struggles that are difficult enough to deal with, Kehau said that the hardest part was actually in recruit class where she was forced to become a number, and no longer a woman. Aside from the physical and mental tests given, as a recruit you are forced to cut your hair. Everyone is supposed to look the same, however this same look is that of a man. You are made to not stand out and just function as a machine, getting the job done. Such a small thing like hair shouldn’t seem like a big deal, however, many tears were shed as her hair came off. She was now being made to fit this “mold” of a male. She felt like she had lost a small sense of her femininity because it was common for people to mistake her for a male or as she said she looked like, “a little Chinese boy.” Sometimes it can be degrading for women to be thought of as masculine, however in this case, you have no control because you must just follow the rules of the job.

Along with the haircut, females must dress the part of the fireman. Their basic outfits are the blues: blue collard shirt, blue pants, belt, and shined black boots. Their gear fire gear has many parts and is an additional thirty-five pounds of added weight. Unfortunately because there are only a handful of women, the gear has been made to fit a male body type. Women sizes do are not available which often make them look manlier adding more questionable looks from people. Most wouldn’t expect to see a woman underneath that helmet.

In the United States, only a small four percent make up the women population in fire department (BLS). Women are still a minority and will be for a long time. While things are slowly changing, societies gender stereotypes are still extremely prevalent. There have become these defined roles in society that people have come to accept because they have been known forever. When it starts to become something different, its not always a good thing and it becomes hard for people to accept that things can change. Men simply don’t want to accept the face that women can do the job. However, things are starting change.

In recent years walls have been broken and continue to come down. It is definitely more socially acceptable for women to take on such jobs as fire fighting and other “man jobs.” While people may be more acceptable towards it the department itself has made minimal changes. Because it is a job, women who want to join will always have to be willing to sacrifice things. Women will always have to cut their hair and be physically strong enough to keep up with the men. They will always have to remain mentally tough and hold themselves to higher expectations because it is just what is required. However, what can change is the way people look at this special group of women who sacrifice themselves every day.

I am a strong believer that women are just as capable as men are in anything they set their minds to even if the odds are not in their favor. It is because so many stereotypes that women are weak and that firefighting is unfeminine that women who are interested in the job end up turning away from it out of fear of being judged. Unfortunately many women are judged just because they are female. Women fire fighters should not be seen as any less of women just because their job requires them to do what society sees as “male work.” If more women join the department and represent themselves well, the future is limitless. Women may no longer be seen as a minority but instead an equally strong fire fighter as the rest of the team.

I understand that it will take time to change people’s views on woman firefighters because as a small group of women they must represent themselves and other women in the mans world of fire fighting. It is a constant struggle to remain mentally and physically tough on a daily basis knowing you have to prove yourself in everything that is done. These women must be the unsung heroes and be content with it in order to survive the job. As long as these women as well as future female fire fighters continue to keep up and do well, the department will become a place where everyone, despite gender, will be treated with respect and dignity.